

## **The Inclusion of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Primary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Autism is a disorder which affects the child's ability to communicate with those around them and develop mutual relations with them. Over the past twenty years, there has been a significant surge in the enrollment of students with autism in mainstream schools. This has created tensions and challenges in schools as staff struggle to meet these students and their families' unique needs. Previous studies have revealed a lack of knowledge among school personnel regarding the distinctive traits and requirements of students with autism, as well as the effective practices necessary to support these students in inclusive educational environments. Therefore, finding a suitable method to communicate with kids and make practice the required duties are an essential concern. Teachers should be provided with

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appropriate training on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) so that they can successfully integrate a child with special needs in the classroom setting since a more knowledgeable teacher is more comfortable with inclusion.

**Keywords:** autism, pedagogical strategies, education, restricted interests, repetitive interests, inclusion

### **Resumen**

El autismo es un trastorno que afecta la capacidad del niño para comunicarse con quienes lo rodean y para el desarrollo de relaciones recíprocas. En las últimas dos décadas, el número de alumnos con autismo matriculados en escuelas regulares ha sufrido un rápido incremento. Esta situación ha creado tensiones y desafíos en las escuelas, ya que el personal docente se esfuerza por satisfacer las necesidades únicas de estos estudiantes y sus familias. Investigaciones anteriores han concluido que los docentes a menudo carecen de conocimiento específico sobre las características y necesidades de los estudiantes con autismo y desconocen las prácticas adecuadas para poder apoyar efectivamente a estos alumnos en entornos de educación inclusiva. Por lo tanto, encontrar un método apropiado para comunicarse con los niños y lograr que lleven a adelante las tareas requeridas es una preocupación esencial. Los docentes deberían recibir una formación adecuada que los habilite a gestionar la integración de un niño con trastornos del espectro autista (TEA) en el salón de clases, ya que un docente con buena formación en el tema se sentirá más cómodo con la inclusión.

**Palabras clave:** autismo, estrategias pedagógicas, educación, intereses restringidos, intereses repetitivos, inclusión

## **The Inclusion of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Primary Schools**

According to Wedell and Dockrell (2020, p. 1), the publication of the Warnock Committee's report titled *Special Educational Needs* in 1978 marked a pivotal moment, as it offered the initial extensive assessment of special educational needs (SEN) in England. This report served as the foundation for subsequent legislation, including the Education Act of 1981 and the more recent Children and Families Act of 2014. In our region, the project *Educating in diversity in the countries of MERCOSUR* was prepared by the member countries with the technical cooperation of the UNESCO Regional Office of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean, UNESCO/Santiago. It was launched in 2001 with funding from the Organization of American States, OAS. The training was based on the UNESCO material *Special Needs in the Classroom* (UNESCO 1993: Set of materials for teacher training *Special needs in the classroom*).

In general, many teachers feel a lack of confidence when preparing to teach children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Internationally, teacher education has typically followed a model whereby programs are structured around higher education (HE) taught content and school-based professional practice. For some years now, there has been an important controversy regarding whether teachers should have more pedagogical knowledge than academic knowledge and vice versa. The most sensible thing is to talk about a balance between both.

All things considered, we understand that addressing the issue of the inclusion of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Primary Schools is of the utmost importance for the professional practice of future teachers.

### **General objective**

- To reflect on the teaching practice with autistic children.

### **Specific objectives**

- To discuss autism in education;
- To be aware of the difficulties of the autistic child in the educational process;
- To identify the teacher's actions to overcome difficulties in the education of autistic children.

### **Methodology**

This work in terms of its nature is classified as basic research. From the point of view of its objectives, the research was carried out with an exploratory nature with a qualitative approach. As for the technical procedures, this research was conducted with a bibliographic nature, consulting material already published such as books and articles.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to the 2023 definition by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022a), a federal agency responsible for health promotion, prevention, and preparedness in the United States, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized as a developmental disability resulting from variations in brain function. Individuals diagnosed with ASD frequently experience challenges in social communication and interaction, along with exhibiting restricted or repetitive behaviors or interests. Thus, each person within the spectrum presents a unique case, both because of the level of support they need, as well as their language, their cognitive level, their sensory profile, and their psychological, biological, and social characteristics. In other words, “autism[...] impaired ways of experiencing the world and understanding that experience” (Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler, 2004, p. 2). However, according to Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler during the early stages of the autism research, it was believed that this diagnosis was an emotional illness caused by parental errors and excessive expectations of their children, therefore, the Freudian theory suggested that autistic individuals needed as much freedom as possible within their educational experience. Nevertheless, the authors of *The Teach Approach to Autism Spectrum Disorders* consider and have confirmed through formal studies that autistic children thrived from structured conditions in the learning process which should be taken into account when interacting with them.

Furthermore, Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler deem that due to the “variability in children's level of disability” (2004, p. 4) and that children within this spectrum possess specific learning problems, specific diagnostic instruments are needed. Throughout the years

and together with the advance in research on this topic, many tests and manuals have been designed, however; the latest manual is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). The latest version of DSM-V shows many differences from the previous version of DSM-IV.

Now, autism, Asperger's syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified are found under the term autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (DSMV, 2014, pp. 28-30).

### **Early warning signs for an ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder)**

Early detection and intervention of children with developmental challenges is essential to accompany them adequately. In this sense, it is key that both families and teachers have information to make visible the indicators and/or warning signs that allow referral to professionals who can diagnose as soon as possible.

Among the various indicators, the gaze stands out as a relevant aspect to consider as a warning sign. The “marked impairments in the use of eye-to-eye gaze even with familiar people and family members” is one of the main alerts of the autism spectrum (Harstad L, Baum C, Yatchmink Y. Shy, 2013, p.20). The ability to engage socially is impeded by various neuropsychological traits associated with autism. First, as noted above, research on early signs of autism reveals widespread deficiencies in social abilities among these children, including challenges in establishing eye contact with their primary caregivers and responding to social cues (Mesibov, Shea and Schopler, 2004, p. 93).

## **Common characteristics of a child with ASD**

### Social Communication and Interaction Skills

Individuals with ASD may encounter difficulties when it comes to social communication and interaction skills. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022b) detail some communication and social interaction characteristics related to ASD which can include (see also Harstad L, Baum C, Yatchmink Y. Shy, 2013, pp. 22-23):

- Lack or avoidance of eye contact.
- Absence of response to their name by 9 months of age.
- Inability to exhibit facial expressions like happiness, sadness, anger, or surprise by 9 months of age.
- Insufficient engagement in simple interactive games like pat-a-cake by 12 months of age.
- Limited or no use of gestures by 12 months of age (e.g., lack of waving goodbye).
- Failure to share interests with others by 15 months of age (e.g., showing someone an object they like).
- Absence of pointing to indicate something of interest by 18 months of age.
- Inability to recognize when others are hurt or upset by 24 months of age.
- Failure to notice other children and join in their play by 36 months of age.
- Lack of pretend play, such as pretending to be a teacher or superhero, by 48 months of age. (CDC, 2022b, p. 1).



## **Restricted or Repetitive Behaviors or Interests**

Children with ASD have behaviors or interests that can seem unusual. ASD distinguishes itself from conditions characterized solely by difficulties in social communication and interaction through the presence of specific behaviors and interests. Once more, according to the guidelines established by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023b), we should be alert to the following examples of restricted or repetitive behaviors and interests related to ASD (CDC, n.d., pp. 12-24) (CDC, 2023b) (see also Boroson, 2012, p. 80-82):

- Demonstrates distress when the arrangement of toys or objects is altered and prefers a specific order.
- Engages in repetitive utterances or phrases (known as echolalia).
- Exhibits consistent play patterns with toys, following the same sequence each time.
- Displays fixation on particular parts of objects, such as a fascination with wheels.
- Reacts negatively to minor changes in their environment.
- Displays intense interests or preoccupations.
- Requires adherence to specific routines.
- Engages in hand flapping, body rocking, or self-spinning behaviors.
- Demonstrates atypical reactions to sensory stimuli, such as sounds, smells, tastes, appearances, or tactile sensations. (CDC, 2023b, p. 1)

### **Executive functions and Intellectual skills**

Intellectual variability (lower, equal to, or higher than average ability) can cause confusion in the educational field, sometimes generating high-performance expectations or, on the contrary, limiting educational opportunities to children who show greater cognitive difficulty but who, with strategies and appropriate supports, can access functional learning levels that enable them to greater possibilities of autonomy. The following are some issues that are evident in language and communication (Ministerio de Educación de la Nación, 2019):

- Lack of language or immature, repetitive or echolalic language.
- Fluent in language but with difficulties using it in reciprocal communication.
- Poverty or absence of non-verbal communication.
- Less possibility of registering keys and codes
- Social difficulties to understand the other and explain yourself.
- Particularities in intonation. Use of words unusual or formal.
- Echolalias (pp. 15-18).

### **Social skills**

In Boroson's work (2011), it is highlighted that the concepts of "social skills" and "social interaction" encompass more than just casual conversations and socializing. They also

encompass socially appropriate behavior that aligns with conventional norms (Boroson, 2011, p. 130). The subsequent examples outline social behaviors typically observed in a school setting:

- Adhering to the guidelines and regulations of the classroom and other environments.
- Showing respect towards the rights, personal space, and belongings of others.
- Demonstrating adaptability when faced with different situations.
- Behaving in a manner that takes into account the emotions and well-being of others (Boroson, 2011, p. 130).

In order to navigate the social world effectively, these skills play a vital role. The implicit nuances of social interaction have been referred to as a concealed curriculum (Boroson, 2011, pp. 129-139). It is expected that students possess or naturally grasp appropriate behaviors across various domains without explicit instruction. On this subject, Boroson (2011) expresses:

Given their challenges in the areas of engagement, emotional regulation, flexibility, and communication, the constantly changing social landscape is a minefield for students on the spectrum. Teachers often assume that students are being oppositional when they do not perform social or behavioral skills that seem age appropriate or that they have been taught before. But students on the spectrum need information specifically taught and retaught many times before it sinks in. (p. 130)

These are some of the characteristics they may present:

- They may present significant social isolation. Little interest in interacting with others.

- Difficulties understanding social niceties and decoding implicit social rules.
- Difficulties in reading the other's intentions, developing and sharing games, and making friends.
- Attempts to relate in atypical ways.

### **Teaching the Hidden Curriculum**

At the beginning of the school year, you probably review the rules with your class. You support compliance with these rules by discussing them with the class, exploring their implications and applications, and posting them for easy and frequent reference. For students on the spectrum, social expectations must be taught much the same way. According to Boroson (2011, pp. 131-132), social rules must be broken down into specific components for students on the spectrum, then prompted, rehearsed, and memorized.

- ***Script It:*** You might ask the school counselor, resource room teacher, or speech and language specialist to write a Social Story.
- ***Lay It Out:*** Before students on the spectrum enter a new situation, try to brief them as to what they should expect and what social behaviors you expect from them.
- ***Break It Up:*** Reduce social rules into the smallest parts necessary; discuss them with your students on the spectrum and check for understanding.
- ***Encourage Memorization:*** Review social rules the way you might drill the multiplication tables.
- ***Social Contracts:*** Make individualized contracts with students as needed, modifying or

adding new goals as targeted skills become assimilated.

## **Challenges**

Children diagnosed with ASD frequently exhibit distinct variations in their communication, behavior, and learning in comparison to their peers. These dissimilarities can result in challenges with social interactions, subsequently leading to difficulties in school, increased stress within their families, and a sense of social isolation. Additionally, “they may become targets of teasing and bullying. Teachers in overcrowded classrooms may encounter difficulties in accommodating their distinct learning styles and individual needs” (Holmes, 2020, p. 1-13).

A clear understanding of their child's strengths and challenges, as well as their child's learning style, enables effective advocates to identify strategies that can better support their child's learning and development. Notbohm and Zysk claim: “If needed, present professional assessments or recommendations as back-up to the services or options you are negotiating. Anticipate information you may need to present to make your case and come prepared with it” (2010, p. 1098).

The challenges faced by students on the autism spectrum affect nearly every aspect of their functioning. Their wide range of difficulties makes almost every task more challenging for them. This collection of overwhelming experiences and setbacks creates a constant state of stress and anxiety for these individuals. In this respect, Boroson (2011) declares that “it is also a tried-and-true recipe for low self-esteem,

depression, and self-destructive behavior. Those debilitating secondary conditions are frequently seen in adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorders” (p. 33).

### **Schooling: The student with ASD**

#### **The Culture of Autism**

To be able to teach people who have been diagnosed with ASD it is important to understand them on a deeper level, *i.e.*, to understand their culture. Even though many would argue that Autistic people cannot be considered to have a culture since said concept involves a shared pattern of human behavior that affects the way people think, communicate, eat, work and interact, authors like Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler would not agree.

The authors of *The Teach Approach to Autism Spectrum Disorders* argue that while autism is not traditionally considered a culture, it does impact how individuals think, eat, dress, work, spend their leisure time, and perceive the world around them (Mesibov, Shea and Schopler, 2004, p. 19-31); therefore, in a sense, it could be considered a culture. Furthermore, they assert that as many cultures find it difficult to interact with each other and evaluate their differences negatively, the same occurs with the autistic culture where their differences are deemed as deficits.

#### **The Role of Teachers and Parents**

Once coming to terms with the fact that ASD people experience the world differently, not deficiently, we can better understand and assess the role of the teacher or parent. This role

should be that of a cross-cultural interpreter, *i.e.*, that of someone who is able to translate the rules and expectations from non-autistic cultures to people within the spectrum successfully to work together effectively. According to Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler “We must understand their culture and the strengths and deficits that are associated with it” (2004, p. 19).

Since these ASD organically-based problems cannot be fully reversed, the educational goal of teachers and parents should not be that of educating to become “normal” but to help people within the spectrum fit into our culture as adults as comfortably and effectively as possible. This goal can be achieved by respecting the differences inherent in autistic people, teaching the skills they will need to function in our culture and no less important, adapting the environment to their needs and limitations. As Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler (2004) state: the aim of educational services for students with autism should be twofold, focusing on enabling them to function with greater ease and effectiveness in society: 1) “increasing their knowledge and skills; and 2) making the environment more comprehensible” (p. 20).

### **Limitations of traditional educational methods**

Due to the characteristics that people with ASD present, it becomes quite clear that the different methods and features of traditional education are not the most adequate for individuals with ASD.

First, one of the most effective and simplest ways of teaching new skills is through spoken language, not only in the classroom but also at home. Both teachers and parents rely

on verbal communication to explain how to master certain skills and behaviors, such as asking for help, solving mathematical problems, what to say and what not to, and understanding the consequences of their actions, among others. According to Mesibov, Shea, and Schopler (2004), verbal explanations and directions are generally successful for most individuals, but they argue that these methods are often ineffective and sometimes even counterproductive for individuals with ASD (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2004, p. 38). In other words, even though they might be paying attention, they might not understand complex structures which contain implied or dual meanings, idioms or abstract concepts. Nonetheless, this difficulty in learning through oral communication does not imply that teachers and parents should not use language as a teaching method but it shouldn't be the sole method on which they rely. Ideally, they should complement it with other methods.

Second, another way in which teachers and parents teach is by demonstrating to students what they need to do. Unfortunately, as Mesibov, Shea and Schopler (2004) affirm, “this technique is significantly less effective for individuals with ASD because it depends on the person's ability to identify and copy the relevant aspects of the demonstration” (p. 38). Several complications might arise when trying to copy the behavior in the display: 1. the person might not be paying attention to the critical moment to be copied; 2. they might recognize the critical moment but not understand how to reproduce it or 3. they might not know which person they are supposed to be watching. Therefore, demonstrations are frequently not sufficient as an educational method.



Lastly, when students have achieved certain goals, teachers and parents usually reward such achievements with social responses such as smiles, physical contact, and verbal compliments like “Good job” or “I’m proud of you”. Nevertheless, in this regard, Mesibov, Shea and Schopler (2004) declare:

The effectiveness of these acts depends on the ability of the learner to decode the symbols of the teacher's pleasure, and on the meaningfulness to the student of the teacher's pride. But an individual with ASD may not understand the communicative intent of a smile, a sticker, a 'thumbs up' etc. or may not find a teacher's expressions of satisfaction to be relevant or meaningful. Overall, social reinforcement often has limited effectiveness with our students. We usually provide it, but we must use other methods in addition. (p. 39)

These difficulties that individuals with ASD face do not imply that they are incapable of learning. On the contrary, they just manifest the need for other techniques to be adopted and implemented by education systems when teaching ASD individuals. (Mesibov, Shea and Schopler, 2004, p. 38-39)

### **Pedagogical and environmental strategies**

The following is a set of pedagogical and environmental strategies proved to help teachers in the classroom (Gunn et al, 2016, pp. 408–430) (Mesibov, Shea and Schopler, 2004, pp. 72-83).

#### **Strategy #1: Limiting Sensory Overload**

As teachers are well aware based on their experience, the classroom can be a bustling environment, particularly in lower grade levels like elementary school. With children's voices, laughter, and the constant presence of lights, it becomes effortless for students to become distracted, especially when they lack the motivation to engage in learning.

#### Warning signs of sensory overload

The authors of *Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism or Asperger's* (Notbohm, Ellen & Zysk, Veronica, 2010) give us a list of twelve warning signs of sensory overload, namely:

1. Loss of balance or orientation.
2. Skin flushes, or suddenly goes pale.
3. The child is verbalizing "Stop!"
4. The child steadfastly refuses activity.
5. Racing heartbeat, or sudden drop impulse.
6. Hysteria, crying.
7. Stomach distress: cramps, nausea, vomiting.
8. Profuse sweating.
9. The child becomes agitated or angry.
10. The child begins repeating echolalic phrases, or some familiar nonrelevant phrase over and over again (self-calming behavior).

11. The child begins stimming (repetitive, self-calming behaviors).
12. The child lashes out, hits, or bites (pp. 81-82).

Students on the autism spectrum often find environmental factors to be particularly overwhelming, leading to significant distractions. According to McCormick et al. (2016), they found that the "prevalence of sensory symptoms of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) range from 69% to 93% in children and adults" (p. 2).

#### Strategy #2: Using Rewards and Incentives

The behavior of regular students can be reinforced through something as simple as a smile or the internal satisfaction of accomplishing something. These students may not require a token economy system to exhibit positive behavior. In fact, when we come across students who are intrinsically motivated, it is recommended not to undermine their natural inclination by imposing unnecessary external token rewards. (Borinson, 2011, p.60).

However, Borinson explains that “students on the spectrum are usually unmoved by (or unaware of) unspoken or abstract reinforcements. They often benefit from concrete reinforcements of their effort and progress” (2011, p. 60). While intangible incentives like extra reading time, or extra computer time may eventually serve as motivation for certain students on the autism spectrum, it is recommended to begin with tangible incentives provided through a token economy system for the time being.

#### Strategy #3: Suitable Feedback for Students with ASD

Outdoor therapy proves highly popular among the majority of young children who are in the process of acquiring language and communication skills. Notbohm and Zysk (2010) stated, “Play equipment such as swings, slides, jungle gyms, and teeter-totters are perfect for working on basic concepts such as in/out, under/over, up/down in both verbal and sign language” (p.p. 367-368). Engaging in physical movement provides children with the sensory feedback necessary for promoting fluent speech.

The authors of *1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism or Asperger's* (2010) provide some strategies to put ideas into practice:

- Practice repetitive language phrases, such as “1, 2, 3!” and “Ready, set, go!” while a child is swinging.
- Teach the child to say or sing “more please” to keep the activity going.
- Teach the child to say or sing “stop” or “all done” when she’s had enough (pp. 367-368).

#### Strategy #4: Focusing on Autism Reading Comprehension Strategies

Considering the prevalence of reading difficulties in children with ASD, educators should be attentive to their approaches when teaching literacy. Here are several techniques and ideas that educators can implement to enhance reading comprehension skills in students with ASD (Pian, L., 2019, pp. 26-33) (*see also* Burke *et al.*, 2016, p. 60-68):

- **Visual supports.** There is a wide range of visual supports available, and incorporating them is highly recommended as one of the most effective practices when it comes to teaching reading

comprehension to students with ASD.

- **Systematic prompting.** One example of systematic prompting is the model-lead-test strategy, a “strategy [that] involves the teacher modeling the problem or skill for the student, leading them through the problem, and then testing them on what they have learned” (Knight & Sartini, 2015, p. 1224 in Pian, L., 2019, p. 27)
- **Explicit teaching of metacognitive skills.** Metacognition is a complex and crucial factor in reading comprehension. To fully comprehend what they read, numerous students with ASD require explicit instruction in metacognitive skills. In this respect, Woolly states: “Metacognitive processing...operate[s] as a background or executive function...and monitors the surface and deeper levels of cognitive processing” [SIC] (2016, p. 49 in Pian, L., 2019, pp. 29-30).
- **Self-monitoring checklists.** In addition to explicitly teaching metacognitive skills to students with ASD, it is helpful to give them access to materials that promote self-monitoring.
- **Anaphoric cuing.** Pian (2019) referenced Whalon and Hart (2011) and stated, “Anaphoric cuing is a specific intervention used to help students ‘identify pronouns and corresponding referents [and] help clarify abstract and decontextualized language’” (p. 13 in Pian, p. 31).
- **Cooperative learning.** Cooperative learning, which involves students collaborating to achieve a shared goal or skill, was found to be highly effective in eliciting accurate responses to reading comprehension questions among students with ASD.
- **Read aloud.** One approach to specifically target discrete reading comprehension skills in students with ASD is reading appropriate texts aloud to them. Read-aloud involves teachers or fluent readers reading texts aloud to students, enabling students with ASD to access and

actively engage with texts that surpass their independent reading level.

### **Final Thoughts**

Including students with autism in general classrooms provides an opportunity for all students to learn from each other and reduce stigma. It also allows for differentiated instruction, which is beneficial for both students with autism and those without. In this way, students build understanding and acceptance of each other, creating positive attitudes and relationships. Differentiated instruction is essential for both those with autism and those without and teachers must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and resources to effectively support students in inclusive classrooms. Pre-service teacher education programs must provide specialized courses that offer evidence-based strategies and resources for teachers to successfully support students with autism spectrum disorder in the classroom.

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